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Mentoring: A Vital Learning Tool for Interpreter Graduates

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Abstract

In 2007, the Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association [Victoria; ASLIA (VIC)] and the Victorian Deaf Society (Vicdeaf) ran a twelve-month pilot mentoring program for new graduate sign language interpreters who lived in the state of Victoria, in collaboration with Macquarie University and the Centre of Excellence for Students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing at the Northern Melbourne Institute of Technical and Further Education (NMIT). Fourteen mentees and matching mentors participated in the program. Both ASLIA (VIC) as a professional body, and Vicdeaf as an employer, shared a commitment to professional development for practitioners and also a keen desire to stem the attrition of experienced interpreters from the industry. This article details the evaluation of the program and the key outcomes for the participants. The evaluation was based on qualitative action research principles and involved formative and summative evaluation. The mentoring program, guided by the principle of lifelong learning, resulted in significant personal and professional gains for the participants. As a result of the pilot program and the evaluation, an ongoing program is planned for 2011.

Keywords: mentoring; sign language interpreting; action research; lifelong learning

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1. Introduction

In 2007, fourteen graduate interpreters in Melbourne, in the Australian state of Victoria, undertook the first ever formal mentoring program for Australian Sign Language (Auslan) Interpreters in the country. This article describes the evaluation of that program and investigates the critical elements that determine a successful mentee-mentor relationship. The mentees met with their mentor over the course of a year, during which the evaluation process sought to find answers to the following three questions: What are the successful components of a mentoring partnership? How important is a mentor to a graduate practitioner? What place does this type of learning have in the wider milieu of lifelong learning?

The increase in demand for interpreting services, coupled with the increase in demand for well-trained and experienced interpreters, has put pressure on the sign language interpreting profession in Australia. A report entitled *Auslan Interpreter Services Supply and Demand* (Access Economics, 2008) discovered that the states of Victoria and Tasmania² have the highest unmet demand for interpreting services. It also revealed that 13% of current practitioners are considering leaving the profession. Lack of workplace support, including mentoring, is mentioned as one of ten reasons for workplace dissatisfaction. These statistics reflect what the local professional body, the Victorian branch of the Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association [ASLIA (VIC)] has been observing for many years. A mentor program had long been discussed and called for by the local interpreter body.

Thus, the goal of this project was to develop more highly skilled interpreters and to encourage interpreters of all experience levels to remain in the field. Specifically, the mentoring program set out to support new graduates exiting their education program and transitioning to “practitioner-in-the-workforce,” in the hope that the graduates would enjoy more success and feel part of the profession; it was also hoped that this would, in turn, curb the high attrition rate. The ideal aim of the program was that it would also provide a learning opportunity for the participants, one in which they could self-reflect and independently develop additional skills that would augment their ongoing professional development. The goal of the program evaluation was to discover whether the aims of the program were achieved and what elements constitute a self-described “successful” mentor-mentee relationship.

This project specifically targeted interpreter graduates receiving the Diploma of Interpreting from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) in 2005 and 2006. This is a one year, part-time program in which many of the students have matriculated from a two-year Diploma of Auslan program. A qualification in Auslan, however, is not mandatory to enter the Diploma of Interpreting; therefore, graduates come from a range of backgrounds, including native signers and people who have worked in the community and developed their language skills over time. The Diploma of Interpreting is the only tertiary-based education program specifically for Auslan interpreters currently provided in Victoria. Successful completion of the program results in an industry entry-level qualification of Paraprofessional Interpreter, endorsed by the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI). The Professional Interpreter level accreditation is only attainable by testing,

² Australia has six states: New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, and Western Australia. Melbourne is the capital city of Victoria.

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and no formal training for this level of accreditation is currently available in Victoria. Macquarie University in Sydney offers a program that can be undertaken by Victorians in distance mode. Even with formal education and training opportunities, there still remains a critical learning and development time that the new graduate must traverse in their professional life before they are able to undertake further study or undergo testing for the next level of accreditation.

The mentoring program and resulting evaluation (i.e., the Auslan Interpreters Mentorship Project) was conceived and developed by the ASLIA (VIC) in partnership with the Victorian Deaf Society (Vicdeaf), Sign Language Communications Victoria (SLC VIC), and in collaboration with Macquarie University and the Centre of Excellence for Students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing at the Northern Melbourne Institute of Technical and Further Education (NMIT).³ The program was designed in consultation with the local interpreter population and directly reflected local needs. The mentoring program was created to support interpreters holistically and was not intended solely as a platform to develop technical skills via coaching. Skills coaching was endorsed; it did not form the premise of the program and was not the focus of the training for the mentors.

Informed by an action research framework approach, the evaluation tools included pre- and post-interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, and a journal that was completed by both the mentees and mentors throughout the duration of the program. Through a cyclical process of evaluating change (as described by Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005), the evaluation drew on an action research framework to both inform the evaluation process during the program and to ensure future programs are modeled on what was learned through this process. This study is significant for interpreter educators, practitioners, and employers, by helping them to understand how mentoring could potentially serve as a learning and development tool for graduate interpreters.

2. Literature review

In order to set the scene for the study, we provide an overview of literature relevant to action research, mentoring in general, and mentoring that is specific to sign language interpreters.

2.1 Action research

To evaluate the mentoring program, it was felt that an action research model would best suit the project. The key principles of action research involve (a) planning a change, (b) acting and observing what occurs, (c) reflecting on the consequences, (d) planning for further changes, followed by (e) making more observations (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005). The cycle of change, observation, and reflection can be repeated, continuously improving the event and learning. The goal is to make real changes to what people do and how they interact in their environment. The emphasis is on actual practices not theoretical assumptions. Action research differs from traditional research in that it occurs in a real situation, rather than a theoretical one that is tested by scientists (Burns and Hood, 1998).

Mentoring is particularly suited to this form of research as it is, in essence, a process that is about transformative change, reflection, and improvement. In addition, action research often occurs within a context of wider social change, such as the green movement or the women's movement. It could be argued that the desire of deaf people to have access to highly skilled and contextually experienced practitioners forms part of their wider social movement for inclusion and rights. Initially, the deaf community fought hard for the right to an interpreter; now the focus of that fight is the education, qualifications, and skills of the interpreters provided.

Interpreting research has led us to leave behind the "conduit" model of interpreting, in which the task was perceived only as an impartial decoding and re-encoding of lexical equivalents. Now we recognize a more holistic

³ The project team consisted of Sandra Leane (Project Coordinator, ASLIA VIC) and Marc Curtis (Manager, SLC VIC), and the evaluation team included Jemina Napier (Consultant, Macquarie University) and Tamara Pearce and Pip Cody (Project Officers).

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model of the interpreter as a linguistically, socially, and culturally aware agent, capable of wider social understanding, and someone who excels in communication and mediation (Metzger, 1999; Roy, 2000; Wadensjö, 1998).

2.2 Mentoring

Mentoring is an established form of support within the nursing and teaching professions (Ballantyne, Hansford & Packer, 1995; Butterworth & Faugier, 1997; Reiman & Thies-Sprinthall, 1998). It is a common learning tool in business (Underhill, 2006); one recent study in Boston, claims that from their research, one in five companies are planning to introduce some type of workplace mentoring program (Kranz, 2010).

The literature discusses mentoring as a holistic development practice and as a tool for technical skills improvement. Arnold (2006) mentions two kinds of support offered by a mentor: (a) personal support to help combat lack of confidence in work or insecurities and (b) professional support to focus more on skills development. Fletcher (2000) states that coaching is a part of mentoring, as is counseling and learning through interaction, and describes additional changes that might occur as a result of mentoring, which include (a) increased reflective practice, (b) the development of a relationship between the mentee and mentor, (c) both professional and personal support being provided, and (d) improved confidence in skills. Brooks and Sikes (1997) discuss a range of mentoring models applied to teachers that can suitably be applied to interpreters, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Brookes & Sikes' Mentoring Models

Model	Features	Implications
Apprenticeship	Modeling Mentee is passive, watches the "master" and learns from their experience	Mentee learns only what the mentor <i>does</i> , but not <i>why</i> they do it or the values that underpin those decisions
Competence-based	Invests the mentor with a training responsibility Mentor trains or teaches the mentee as per pre-defined competencies	Model that underpins the vocational training sector in Australia Subordinate role for the mentee
Reflective coach	Peer-based relationship Reflective coach encourages the mentee to revisit their work and, via discussion and reflection, guide the mentee toward a deeper understanding	Mentor and mentee on equal footing Mentee encouraged to develop critical thinking skills about their work
Co-enquirer	Peer-based relationship	Mentor and mentee observe and collaborate together Involves both working to critically analyze the mentees work together

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The reflective coaching model is popular in sign language interpreting, although it was not the goal of this project. Coaching is described as “an active process which depends on the mentor making planned and systemic interventions into the students reflection in order to make them more meaningful and analytical” (Brooks & Sikes, 1997, p. 23). By questioning underlying assumptions and exploring ideas, the mentee will hopefully gain a deeper knowledge from their own work experience. It is argued that this type of reflection process should be modeled and taught to graduates as a professional skill at the time of their training. London (2002) emphasizes that “coaching is an on-going, one-on-one learning process enabling people to enhance their job performance” (p.164)—a statement that is also easily applied to interpreters and interpreting.

Peluchett and Jeanquart (2000) recommend that different mentors could be used for different aspects of work, although this was not possible within the scope of this project. Eby, McManus, Simon, and Russell (2000) highlight the potential negative experiences of mentoring but emphasize that if someone has a negative experience, this does not necessarily mean that they have had a negative relationship. Godshalk and Sosik (2000) state that mentoring agreement and under- or over-estimation of the relationship can impact the quality of that relationship; thus, these issues were taken into consideration in the development of this mentoring program.

2.3 Mentoring sign language interpreters

In a recent white paper by the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers, mentoring for sign language interpreters was reported as the “...most common approach to inducting new practitioners into the fields and orienting experienced practitioners into areas of specialization” (National Consortium Mentoring Workteam, 2009, p. 2). Hawkings and Walker (2008) conducted a survey of different countries to ascertain the mentoring arrangements for sign language interpreters and found that some form of formal or informal mentoring or coaching system existed in most countries.

There is no doubt that as a model of learning, success with mentoring has been experienced in a range of contexts. In particular, some of the literature makes reference to the concept of “skills gap.” This refers to the time in which an interpreter graduates from their training program but is yet to either be accredited/certified by the sanctioning body or develop sufficient professional practitioner experience. Several pieces of literature refer to interpreters’ skills gaps or lack of readiness-to-work (Bontempo & Napier, 2007; Clark, 1994; Frishberg, 1994; Nishimura, Bridges, & Owen-Beckford, 1995; Resnick, 1990; Wiesman & Forestal, 2006).

Much of the literature on mentoring sign language interpreters recognizes that after completing an interpreter training program, the mentee interpreter is all too often placed on the job with little or no support or the opportunity for improvement. The literature further emphasizes that interpreters need to be afforded the opportunity to grow, not only in their skills, but professionally and ethically (Barber-Gonzales, Preston & Sanderson, 1986), and the importance of interpreters being supported by more experienced interpreters as “seasoned professionals” (Napier, 1996; Plant-Moeller, 1992). Gunter and Hall (1996) stress that “it is imperative that the professionals of today guide the professionals of tomorrow so that we may grow, not only as individuals, but also as a body of professionals” (p. 114). Preston (1995) states that mentoring should be designed to develop interpreter skills through an on-going relationship.

Palmer (1986) states that mentoring in the sign language interpreting profession is:

...an undertaking that requires intensity, commitment, common goals, and a lot of dialogue on insights and problem-solving. The mentor is usually an advisor and friend to the protégé.... Initially, the mentor and protégé work out mutual needs and expectations matched to accomplishments.” (p. 141)

This allows for sign language interpreters to engage in a “nurturing” mentoring process (Anderson & Shannon, 1995; Nishimura, Bridges & Beckford, 1996). According to the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf in the US, mentors should demonstrate, among other things, the following qualities: be willing to share knowledge; be encouraging, experienced, and open to learning and role modeling; demonstrate mutual respect; be credible and display appropriate professional demeanour, enthusiasm and patience; be personable, dependable, open-minded,

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committed, and talented; know their own limitations and what they do not know; be assertive; and have realistic expectations and world knowledge (Registered Interpreters for the Deaf, 1995). Davis, Fried, Herbst, McCaffrey, Toothman, and Clark (1994) provide guidelines for sign language interpreter mentors that encourage mentors to reflect on who they have looked up to and been guided by, both professionally and personally. They acknowledge that mentoring can provide a context for working interpreters to upgrade their skills, and Harrigan (1999) suggests that this upgrade occurs by exploring the technical aspects (i.e., cognitive, linguistic, cultural) of the interpreting process through collaborative guidance with a more experienced interpreter.

Labath (1998) recommends that mentor and protégé interpreters agree on their approach to the mentoring relationship and define what the relationship will involve and the goals for interpreting skills development. She advises that protégés need to have some ownership and make suggestions, as well as accept guidance from their mentors. The experience of the Master Mentor Program for American Sign Language interpreters administered by Northeastern University in the US was that “quite simply mentors are capacity builders and skill multipliers who know how to guide adult learners in a lifelong process of professional self-discovery” (Project TIEM, 2009). Therefore, the program evaluation was designed to search for evidence of these critical changes.

One of the few publications on mentoring sign language interpreters outside of the United States discusses the situation in Australia. Napier (2006) adapted Kram’s (1985) notions of mentoring “phases” and identified six key phases for a sign language interpreter mentor/protégé relationship with a proposed curriculum for a formal mentoring program based on these six phases:

1. Developing a mentoring plan (*Initiation*)
2. Preparing for interpreting assignments (*Cultivation*)
3. Joint interpreting assignments (*Cultivation*)
4. Supervised interpreting assignments (*Cultivation*)
5. Analysis of recorded interpreting material (*Cultivation*)
6. Developing a portfolio (*Separation & Redefinition*)

Napier’s discussion is significant when considering the development of a local program. Napier identifies several issues in the development of a program, such as how it will be coordinated, who will develop the training, and who will be responsible for the program overall. There are two main contenders, the professional association (ASLIA) or the interpreting agencies. Napier argues the need for a nationally run mentoring program and highlights potential difficulties. These include the employment of interpreters who work for a range of agencies, making the coordination of a program difficult from an employer perspective.

In considering how individual interpreters can process the learning experience of mentoring, the six-stage Cycle of Competence described by Napier, McKee, and Goswell (2010) in relation to the skills development of sign language interpreters can also be applied to the mentoring process. At a beginning level of *unconscious incompetence* (Stage 1), mentees have less awareness of their actual skills. Through the mentoring process, they may become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses or their need to improve; this allows progression to *conscious incompetence* (Stage 2), an awareness of what one does not know.

The ideal progression is to develop this awareness along with our skills, with insight into what we are doing effectively; this is the stage of *conscious competence* (Stage 3). Once a skill has been thoroughly acquired, we begin to function so automatically that we become unconscious of what we do know; this is the stage of *unconscious competence* (Stage 4). We continually move between stages of conscious and unconscious competence as new skills are developed. In the fifth stage, *reflective competence*, an interpreter is able to reflect on their performance and identify further areas for improvement, which leads them back to Stage 2, starting the improvement cycle again. However, if an interpreter bypasses reflective competence they can move into *complacency* (Stage 6). When we are complacent and non-reflective, bad habits can become fossilized, and we run the risk of moving back to a level of unconscious incompetence (Stage 1). (Napier, McKee & Goswell, 2010, pp. 58–59).

Coaching can also be an appropriate method for interpreters to develop awareness of competence levels. For example, Portland’s Community College Interpreter Program focuses discussion of mentoring work on the interpreting “product” and “process,” both of which are seen as equally valuable (Hearn & Moore, 2006).

A review of the literature on mentoring in general reveals that, although existing frameworks exist for mentoring, these frameworks may not appropriately “fit” with the needs of sign language interpreters. Similarly, a

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review of the literature on mentoring in sign language interpreting highlights that although progress has been made on developing mentoring structures, more work needs to be done to understand the mentoring needs of sign language interpreters. Nonetheless, it is clear that the demand for mentoring of some kind is evident. In particular, there is a need for newly graduated interpreters to be mentored as they transition into the workforce.

Thus an action research project was developed to address key questions regarding sign language interpreter mentoring for graduates, reflecting the needs in this local context.

3. A mentoring project and evaluation of mentoring as a learning tool

A localized mentoring program was devised within an action research framework in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the program and answer the following research questions.

- What are the successful components of a mentoring partnership?
- How important is a mentor to a graduate practitioner?
- How does mentoring function as a form of learning in a community of practice?
- What place does this type of learning have in the wider milieu of lifelong learning?

3.1 *The mentoring program structure*

The program ran for 12 months across a calendar year (i.e., 2007). For the participants, the program consisted of training, social events, meetings between mentee and mentor, and participating in the evaluation process. The pairs were requested to meet for 15 face-to-face sessions, twice a month for the first three months, then monthly thereafter. Additional meetings and contact was at the discretion of the participants. The participants determined where and when they would meet. Locations included private homes, cafes, and at either of the participants' places of work. Places were filled in the program by calling for expressions of interest for both mentors and mentees. The program capped places at 14 to reflect the budget allocated. Both the mentees and mentors completed a profile document that assisted the coordinator matching the pairs.

Training for the mentors was conducted for eight hours over two days. The training was developed and delivered by the Australian Institute of Management (AIM), which has had much experience with mentoring in a business environment. The content was developed in conjunction with the project coordinator. The training covered the role of the mentor, understanding mentoring and coaching, communication, journaling, and personal reflection. This training reflected the underlying style of the mentoring, which was holistic. In this context, this meant that the mentee and the mentor would meet to discuss their interpreting work, ethical issues, critical decision making, and personal reflections. Coaching the mentee's technical skills was possible if agreed upon, and orchestrated by the mentoring pairs, but was not the principle focus of the relationship.

The mentees had one three-hour session with an experienced interpreter mentor and trainer and the mentoring project coordinator. During this session, the mentees explored their expectations of the program and discussed journaling as a self-reflection tool.

3.2 *Mentoring program evaluation*

Action research advocates a range of data collection methods. Burns and Hood (1998) describe data collection methods as either observational or non-observational. Direct observation of the mentoring sessions themselves was not seen as necessary for two reasons. First, it was felt that the success of the program was best evaluated through the direct self-reporting of the participants. Second, a third party observing the sessions would have altered the dynamics and possibly skewed the outcome of the sessions. Therefore, the participants were asked to complete journals relating to their sessions as a form of observational data collection. The other non-

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observational data collection methods included questionnaires, focus groups, and face-to-face interviews. Evaluation methods were both formative and summative.

Across the 12-month period of the program, there were five different opportunities for data collection from the mentors and four from the mentees. Mentees were interviewed face-to-face both before and after the program. The mentors completed a questionnaire prior to commencing the program and were interviewed face-to-face at the completion of the program. Ideally, the mentors would have been interviewed pre-program as well as the mentors, however budgetary restrictions prevented this. Both mentees and mentors were required to complete a journal throughout the program. The evaluation journal was structured in three parts, Parts A, B and C. Initially, a format was provided for the first six formal meetings (Part A). Data analyzed from the pre-program interviews and questionnaires informed the design of the journal structure for meetings 7–12 (Part B). Analysis from Part A of the journal informed the design of the final section of the journal, Part C (sessions 13–15). By adopting an action learning cycle to the development of the evaluation journal, a more tailored and organic structure was devised. Some of the questions in the journal overlapped with questions posed in the interviews. This allowed for the responses to be formed at different times and for them to be compared. The mentors completed an additional questionnaire that related specifically to the training they undertook prior to the program commencing. The results from this questionnaire instrument were analyzed and compared with the data provided at the end of the training (via a separate questionnaire and journal).

3.3. Summary of data collection methods

Table 2 provides an overview of the data collected and how it was analyzed in a data matrix.

Table 2: Data Matrix

Task/measure	Data collection tool	Procedure for data collection	Method of analysis
Pre-training expectations of mentors	Questionnaire	Questionnaire emailed to mentors prior to training and collected at the commencement of the training	Content/thematic analysis, discourse analysis
Pre-program mentor expectations, thoughts and goals	Questionnaire	Questionnaire emailed to mentors prior to commencement of the program	Content/thematic analysis
Pre-program mentee expectations, thoughts and goals	Face-to-face interview including a written questionnaire	Interview conducted one-on-one with a project officer, audio taping of the interview transcribed	Content/thematic analysis, quantification of responses
Mentee and mentor thoughts and experiences during the program	Written journal	Structured journal in three parts (A, B and C) provided to the participants as required, responses submitted electronically	Content/thematic analysis
Post-program mentee conclusions and reflections on the program	Face-to-face interview including a written questionnaire	Interview conducted one-on-one with a project officer, audio taping of the interview transcribed	Content/thematic analysis, quantification of responses

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Post-program mentor conclusions and reflections on the program	Face-to-face interview	Interview conducted one-on-one with a project officer, audio taping of the interview transcribed	Content/thematic analysis
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3.4 Participant profile

The mentees ($n=14$) fell into two distinct groups: new graduates with no interpreting experience (six) or recently qualified interpreters with up to two years experience (eight). Two of the mentees did not live in metropolitan Melbourne and were based in regional towns within the state of Victoria. All of the mentees were graduates of the Diploma of Interpreting at RMIT. This is a one-year, part-time interpreting qualification that requires fluency in Auslan and English to enter.

Mentors were required to be accredited as a NAATI Professional Level interpreter⁴ or be experienced Deaf Relay interpreters (DRIs). Given that there are currently no formal training opportunities for DRIs in Australia, the project team used their discretion to encourage the most senior and highly experienced DRIs to participate. Two of the fourteen mentors were DRIs and the remaining 12 were NAATI accredited Auslan/English interpreters.

3.5 Difficulties with the data collection

Some difficulties were encountered during the collection of data. The mentee pre-program interview incorporated a written survey. Three mentees had difficulty completing the survey at this stage in the program because they had not yet commenced work as an interpreter (having just graduated from their diploma course). In the final interviews at the completion of the program, copies of the survey were inadvertently not provided to five of the mentees and therefore had to be completed post-interview. One of the mentees failed to return his/her survey.

At various times, technological error and life events prevented some of the participants from completing parts of the evaluation. Reasons for missing data included (a) the technical failure of one of the transcription tapes; (b) one mentee no longer having had access to a computer at the end of the program (he/she was encouraged to submit a hand-written copy but declined to do so); (c) one mentee having had a serious accident at the start of the program and, although having met with their mentor, was recovering from substantial injuries and did not complete the journal; and finally, (d) no explanation having been offered for the final missing mentee journal. Strenuous efforts were made to recover all the data.

Of the mentors, one lost their pre-program questionnaire due to computer failure and two others were not submitted. The poor attendance at the mid-point focus group was largely a result of people having other commitments. Many comments were made throughout the data that suggested people would have liked to have attended the focus group.

⁴ Interpreters of all languages in Australia are accredited by the National Accreditation Authority for Translators & Interpreters (NAATI) at the Paraprofessional, Professional, Conference, or Senior Conference level. Professional level is considered to be the minimum professional standard with Paraprofessional accreditation regarded as being a “stepping stone” to achieving the Professional level. Auslan/English interpreters are only able to attain accreditation at the Paraprofessional or the Professional level.

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4. Results of evaluation

Evaluation of the success of the mentoring project involved reviewing and analyzing the range of data collected throughout the mentoring program and collecting reports from the participants concerning their perceptions of their experiences during the mentoring program.

4.1 Return rates

Table 3: Data Collection Return Rates

Mentees	Number returned	Percentage returned
Interview prior to the program, incorporating a short questionnaire	13/14	93%
Focus group mid-point in the program	6/14	43%
Interview post-program, incorporating a short questionnaire	14/14	100%
Journal during the program	11/14	79%
Mentors	Number returned	Percentage returned
Pre-training short questionnaire	13/14	93%
Questionnaire after the training, prior to the program	11/14	79%
Focus group mid-point in the program	4/14	29%
Interview post-program	14/14	100%
Journal during the program	12/14	86%

4.2 Journal data

Analysis of the journal data provides an insight into the nature of the discussion within the formal mentoring meetings. The session topics presented here are in order of the frequency in which they were cited in the participants' journal data:

1. Managing people and dynamics
2. Technical skills
3. Managing situations ethically, hypothetical and real life scenarios
4. Professional and personal boundaries
5. Preparation
6. Tandem interpreting
7. Vocabulary

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8. Educational versus community interpreting, pros and cons of each
9. Business skills, such as invoicing and tax
10. What to expect in the workplace
11. Interpreting field, organizations, and politics

The actual work in the sessions between mentee and mentor that was described in the journals varied. Some pairs merely talked; others set concrete goals and tasks. The pairs were mixed in how goals were set. The definition of a goal in this context is an agreed-upon action on the part of the mentee to be actively undertaken on their own, outside of the mentoring meetings. Goals were either set by the mentee or in conjunction with the mentor. The most common goals set in sessions were:

1. To attempt jobs of a more difficult nature or jobs in a new context, such as working with people who are deafblind
2. To implement strategies discussed in the session, commonly relating to ethical issues
3. To complete translation exercises
4. To utilise existing resources, such as video material

Thematic analysis of the data gathered through the journals and interview process revealed a typical pattern of the relationship between mentees and mentors. Most relationships undertook an initial meeting and introduction phase that lasted during the first and, possibly, the second meeting of the mentee with the mentor. During this time the pair established areas of concern, areas of expertise (in the case of the mentor), and potential goals and or tasks. The next 4–6 meetings focused on the business of mentoring with both addressing the earlier identified goals and working with new scenarios that appeared in the working life of the mentee. The mid-point in terms of time (around 6 months) emerged as a critical time of renewal, re-focusing, and moving forward or, alternatively for some pairs, it signalled the winding down of the usefulness of the relationship. All of the pairs had developed a personal relationship with each other, and some chose to coast along, tackling issues as they emerged. Other mentors recognized the lull and attempted to issue more challenges and take more control of the sessions.

It was from the mid-point in the program that telephone use, mobile phone text messaging, and e-mail contact became more common. With the relationship established, using alternative communication means worked well, especially for those who lived or worked long distances from their partner. Communication, in addition to the formal meetings, was used by half of the pairs (7/14).

The most common meeting time length was 1.5 hours. Many pairs met for longer than that, choosing to meet less often, but longer. Three pairs, that at times struggled to fill the hour, met mostly for one hour and did not use all 15 sessions. In fact, only two pairs used all 15 sessions. Ten sessions was the most common number of times participants met; however, this does not factor in time spent on the phone, additional debriefings, or contact via e-mail.

Five pairs had the opportunity to undertake interpreting work together. In addition, one mentee observed their mentor working, and two mentors observed their mentee at work. The mentees that did work with or observe their mentor benefited greatly from the experience. No negative experiences were related. Working together was not an option for some, as the nature of the work the mentor undertook prohibited an inexperienced interpreter to be present. It was difficult to find jobs that were suitable for co-working and could be successfully attempted by an inexperienced mentee interpreter. Some pairs were disappointed that they did not have the opportunity; however, others felt it was not necessary and, indeed, that it was disruptive to the relationship.

One pair was able to work on a weekly job together for a period of eight weeks, and another pair focused on the interpretation of a theatre production. These are excellent examples of how the program adapted to the needs of a particular mentee. At a minimum, all of the pairs reported developing a warm working relationship and enjoyed a strong collegial relationship with their partner. Only one mentor reported they would not be interested in participating in a future program, and that was due to time constraints and other commitments.

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4.3 Pre- and post-program data

The mentor pre-program questionnaire consisted of (a) seven open-ended questions designed to establish the expectations of the mentor, (b) examples of what the mentor felt he/she and the mentee may get out of the program, (c) suggestions as to what the major areas of discussion might be, (d) expected challenges, (e) details on how the process would impact the mentor's own practices, and (f) what skills would be utilized. The final question specifically concerned self-reflection and asked the mentors to consider what techniques may encourage a mentee to develop self-reflection tools. Post-program interview questions numbered 16. These questions covered program management issues such as how participants were matched, the pre-program training, and program length. In addition, the mentors were asked to discuss (a) what skills they had gained or still lacked, (b) what effect the program had on the mentee, (c) topics that were discussed, (d) whether skills coaching was possible, (e) whether self-reflection was developed, and finally, (e) whether they would continue in the program.

The mentees were posed nine pre-program interview questions and provided a short survey containing 14 questions. The interview covered topics such as (a) expectations, (b) concerns, (c) predicting what they might learn by the end of the program, (d) specific areas they had identified to improve upon, and (e) what they might contribute to the program. Post-program, the questions sought to discover (a) what the mentee had gained from the experience and how this related to their expectations, (b) whether skills coaching was possible and how it would be structured, (c) whether the mentee's desire to remain an interpreter was influenced by having a mentor, and (d) whether having a mentor had an impact on the mentees work that was undertaken. In addition, there were questions relating to the program management, such as the length of the program, payment for services, and recommendations for improvement.

4.3.1 The mentee questionnaire

Through the initial interviews, the most desired outcome of the program identified by the mentees was to improve in confidence and to receive support. Other outcomes sought were advice, an empathetic ear, a challenge, and the opportunity to be heard with honesty, openness, and tact. Mentees wanted to feel that the mentor would be open to any question or concern without passing judgment. In terms of technical skill development, readback/voicing or Auslan-to-English interpretation was the most cited area of development (5/13 mentees).⁵ Other specific areas were working in tandem, working in front of a group, and fingerspelling.

A survey was conducted with the mentees to measure any change in their confidence. The same survey was completed prior to the program (in the initial interview) and also in the final interview. Questions focused on the confidence of the mentee in a range of interpreting contexts, as well as questions about the likelihood of the mentee working in the field in five and in ten years time. Mentees were asked to rate their responses on a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

The results indicated a clear and resounding improvement in confidence across all interpreting contexts (i.e., triad, group, educational setting) in both language directions, co-working in primary mentor, and in secondary mentee roles, as well as in situational management. In the initial survey, 9 of the 13 mentees rated confidence in working in a triad (Auslan to English) predominately at *agree* (4), where it remained. However, an additional mentee selected *strongly agree* (5) at the completion of the program; no one had selected this category previously. The shift was more dramatic in English to Auslan; the majority (11/13) selected *agreed* indicating that they were confident, which was up from only 7 of the 13. The overall response to working in a triad (in both language directions) was initially 62% (*agree*) and grew to 77% with an additional 8% *agreeing strongly* (previously 0%).

With such an overall shift in the confidence of the mentees in a range of contexts and in both language directions, it is safe to conclude that the first and second years of an interpreter's working life are one of great changes and development. It is difficult to ascertain how much of this can be attributed to the mentoring program and how much would have occurred anyway. The mentees themselves, although reporting great benefit from the program, including increased confidence, could not quantify to what degree the improvement in their confidence was attributable to experience and to what degree the improvement was attributable to the presence of a mentor.

⁵ Although 14 mentees undertook the program, one mentee failed to complete the pre-program survey and, therefore, their results are not incorporated in this section.

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Two things can be concluded: (a) that this time is critical in developing confidence for new practitioners and (b) that having a mentor can contribute to increased confidence in new graduates.

Increased confidence in working as a team was also identified by 7 of the 13 mentees experiencing an increase in *agreeing* or *strongly agreeing* to being confident. All of the mentees that undertook interpreting work with their mentor (5/13) reported that the experience was positive. In addition, the topic of working with another interpreter was also one of the most commonly cited discussion areas for the pairs.

Management of the interpreted event was identified in both the journals and in the interviews as a major area of concern and discussion. In the survey, when asked if they agreed with the statement, "I am confident managing the interpreting situation. I will happily manage my own break times, assert my role if necessary, and request clarification when required," the number of mentees *agreeing* with this statement grew from four to ten with an additional two *strongly agreeing*. This shows a strong shift in the perception of the mentees' ability in this area. Another area much discussed in the sessions was that of managing business affairs, billing, negotiating with clients and booking agencies, and negotiating fees. Confidence in this ability rose as well, with 5 of the 13 selecting (5), *strongly agreeing*, up from only 2 of the 13.

Mentees were also asked to consider the likelihood of remaining in the profession in five and ten years time. A similar pattern of response occurred with both questions. Initially, the majority of responses *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they would still be in the field. By the end of the program, responses were spread across the range of responses. More people chose to *disagree* and more people choose to *strongly agree* that they would stay. It might appear that the year meant the mentees were able to see their future more clearly. In response to the question about whether they would be working in the field in ten years time, 9 of the 13 responded positively and 4 of the 13 negatively.

5. Participants' perceptions

The mentees' initial learning requirement focused on specific skills acquisition. Over time, this changed as the breadth of learning available to them became apparent. For most participants, there was a shift away from microanalysis of the elements of interpreting to a more broad discussion of the values and philosophies underpinning decisions. This is demonstrated in the following mentee quotes, taken from the final interviews.

I think all of us had expectations that the programme would help us with our signing skills. That's not really what I got out of it. What I got out of it was actually better because it was more validation and the ethical issues and looking at handling or controlling different situations, and being able to ask how better or how else to manage situations.

If you had a bad time, or you had an awful situation such as an awful doctor who was awful to the patient you could just spill it all out to the mentor. I never thought about that kind of stuff, or that I would need help with that either. I just thought it was about my Auslan skills – and I knew I needed to improve them because I was brand new, and I do still need to improve them—I hadn't actually thought about the situations.

For the mentees, a significant aspect of the mentoring relationship was the fact that the relationship that developed with their mentor did not necessarily end when the formal mentoring program finished, as illustrated by the following comments from the final interviews.

One thing that I didn't expect was that my mentor and I got on so well so that now [he/she has] become a friend. I didn't know who my mentor was going to be, but the person they matched me with was so perfect for me. Now we will continue on. [My mentor] can still be a support or even a friend. So I didn't really expect that.

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My mentor now wants to keep going, regardless of fees. We've struck up a bit of a professional friendship. I didn't know that I'd get as much out of it as I have, if you know what I mean.

At the completion of the program, the two most commonly reported outcomes by mentors were an acknowledgment of the wealth of knowledge and experience the mentors possessed and a greater reflection on their own practice. Mentors reported that their life experience, professional experience, communication skills, and professional networks were their greatest assets. From the final interviews, some mentors share their reflections.

The first two or three times it was a formal mentoring relationship but it became much more of an equal, sharing, interactive relationship after that.

I have also started to ponder the idea of doing further study due to this experience.

It's very much been a partnership where we've both developed new skills throughout this relationship.

I've definitely stopped and looked at myself and my own practice a lot more than I did previously because I think when someone asks you what you would do in a certain situation you actually have to think about what you actually have done. Sometimes the thing that you think you "should do" or you "would do," you don't actually do when it comes to the crunch, for reasons that are beyond the initial considerations that you made. It doesn't necessarily mean that you do the wrong thing, but when you have these hypotheticals in your mind, they are very different from real life. So I think this mentor programme has made things a lot more realistic for me.

The comment below, also from the final interviews, shows evidence of the co-enquirer model proposed by Brooks and Sikes (1997), whereby the mentor and mentee discuss an aspect of work and critique it together or find a solution to a problem.

We always focused on the positive things to start off a session then we'd get to a point where there were some issues. Then we would discuss the issues, and try and look at different ways to either resolve them or work things differently, and talk about problem solving techniques. Then we would finish on something positive.

Clearly the program had educational outcomes for the mentors as well as the mentees. As mentioned above, one mentor talks about further study, and a mentee also states an intention to sit for the professional level qualification much earlier than he/she had planned, due to this experience.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

The goal of the mentoring program was to assist new graduates in the transition from student to practitioner in the workforce. Data revealed that both the mentors and mentees felt the benefit of the mentoring program. Evidence of increased confidence across a range of interpreting scenarios was reported by the mentees, as well as the ability to manage stress, professional business tasks, and the interpreting situation. As was identified in the literature, it can be difficult to categorically link the mentoring work to the development of the mentee. However, the mentees

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were able to report confidently that having a mentor made a difference and had a significant impact on their ability to cope with difficult situations and improve their technical skills. Most mentees saw the program as an opportunity to continue their schooling and develop technical skills but were surprised to receive much more in the way of personal and professional support.

The mentoring work achieved strategies and a schema for handling work situations. Issues that arose were discussed and strategies were developed. From the mentees' journals it became clear that a problem-solving template or approach was developed in conjunction with their mentor. This template was then able to be applied independently by the mentee. This transition, to self-reflection and self-analysis, is a key lifelong learning tool.

There was evidence of the mentoring models discussed in the literature. The most common was that of the reflective coach model (Brooks & Sikes, 1997), in which elements of the mentee's work are discussed and reflected upon. Mentors reported a stronger awareness of their own practice and increased reflection upon it. This was an important outcome, as much of the focus of the program is on the mentees; however, the benefits for the mentor were substantial.

The most common reflection reported from the mentors was that they became cognizant of their own achievements, body of work, and accumulated skills. Mentors were challenged to let others talk and developed their communication skills in the process. One of the long-term goals of the program was to encourage interpreters to stay in the field. By creating a feeling of connectedness to the profession, and by providing the mentors with recognition of their achievements, mentoring encourages both mentees and mentors to remain in their field. A mentoring program offers educational opportunities that are currently unable to be delivered by existing formalized learning programs.

Recommendations from participants will influence future programs and the next cycle of action research. The participants requested more training for the mentors and more interaction opportunities for both mentees and mentors. Although operating as a two-person unit, both mentees and mentors expressed a need to meet with others in the program—to get ideas, find inspiration, and to feel connected. Mentors especially needed their own support, in particular, because this was the inaugural program. These recommendations will be incorporated into the next stage of the action research cycle, through the development of the next mentoring program that is being planned for 2011.

As foreseen by Napier (2006), the complex nature of employment structures and interpreting work created a barrier for participants to work or observe each other. This did not obstruct the overall success of the program for the mentees but will require consideration for future programs in that there will be a need to work more closely with employers to ensure opportunities for skills coaching are available for the participants, should they want it.

The Victorian interpreting and deaf communities have benefited greatly and, hopefully, will support an ongoing program. The focus of this program was new graduates. There are other possibilities for mentoring, such as a specialized focus, as was seen in the pair that worked together on a theater production. This idea could be extended to contexts such as mental health or court interpreting. Peer-to-peer mentoring should also be considered in order to increase the opportunity for mentoring the whole interpreter community, as mentoring has proved to be a significant learning opportunity for both the mentees and mentors. Ideally, mentoring could be incorporated into formal training programs to provide a seamless transition. This approach would foster a lifelong learning philosophy and help create professional networks that can bridge the transition from student to practitioner.

We envisage that such an approach to mentoring interpreter graduates could be applied with signed and spoken language interpreter graduates worldwide, although systematic evaluation of appropriate structures would need to be undertaken before generalizations can be made. We conclude with the following quote from a mentee, which we feel encapsulates the fact that mentoring is a vital learning tool for interpreter graduates.

I am very grateful to have been included in a mentoring program. I hope it continues, so that first year graduates get the benefit straight away. Also I believe any interpreter who hasn't had the opportunity of mentoring would benefit from being in the program. I think it is an essential step to continue to grow and develop as an interpreter.

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